

Institutional Change Through Policy Learning: The Case of the European Commission and Research Policy

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Abstract

Research initiatives to enhance knowledge-based societies demand regionally coordinated policy approaches. By analyzing the case of the European Commission, Directorate-General Research and Innovation, this study focuses on examining the cognitive mechanisms that form the foundation for institutional transformations and result in leadership positions in regional governance. Drawing on policy learning theories, the study emphasizes specific mechanisms of institutional change that are often less noticeable but can gradually lead to mobilizing diverse groups of stakeholders. Through historical and empirical data, this study shows the importance of policy learning through communication processes, Open Method of Coordination initiatives, and issue framing in creating a stronger foundation for policy coordination in European research policy since the 2000s.

KEY WORDS: European Commission, European governance, institutional change, policy coordination, research policy, innovation policy, policy learning, issue framing

Introduction

Research and innovation policy has become one of the central and most promising areas for regional growth in the European Union (EU) (Europe 2020, 2015). Since 2000 an increasing effort has been put into achieving a more coordinated approach to research policy across the member-states. Initiatives such as the Lisbon Strategy, the launch of the European Research Area (ERA), and the Innovation Union plan are tied to the rapidly increased monetary instruments. Financial commitments to achieve a cross-regional approach to research and innovation policy are reaching 80 billion euros for the period of 2014–2020, representing a 46% budget increase (European Commission, 2011). The European Commission's Directorate-General Research and Innovation (RTD) plays a key role in facilitating the process. With its increased prominence in the policy area, the impact of RTD has continuously grown (Prange, 2003) and since 2000 it has established itself as a leader in regional governance.

The process of moving toward coherent research policy in Europe has not been a smooth undertaking. Banchoff (2002) states that in few areas has the pressure for deeper integration been as great as in research policy. However, as research and innovation is a sector that contributes to a country's economic growth, the willingness to yield power "naturally" to the supra-national level has been limited (Gornitzka, 2009; Kuhlmann, 2001). Since the early 1950s there has been a fear of losing its exclusive authority to legislate, regulate, and benefit from the progress made through national innovation projects. Yet the European Commission has been actively working toward gaining stronger regional support for the European level initiatives among the member-states (Cram, 2011; De Bruijn & Lagendijk,

2005). For example, in 2003, the European Commission introduced the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) initiative in research policy to foster mutual policy learning through benchmarking, action plans, and exchange of best practices (Morano-Foadi, 2008; Van Vught, 2010). OMC also served as a significant trigger for influencing a gradual shift for the DG Research from operating as a funding agency toward becoming a policy developer and leader in shaping the European Research Area. By facilitating a mutual dialogue among the member-states and providing support in a nonauthoritarian way, the Commission has taken several strategic steps that have contributed to strengthening the position of the organization and have led toward increased legitimacy in regional governance.

This article will examine the emerging role of the European Commission RTD in building linkages among the member-states and the other Commission units while shifting its own identity from being a small-scale funding agency into a major policy developer. The research questions that guide this study are the following: *How do we explain the emerging role of the European Commission, DG Research and Innovation in shaping the European research policy? What are the key mechanisms that trigger such institutional change?*

Previous research on institutional transformations examines change in policies from a linear, rational perspective (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1984). This article takes a different approach and suggests that institutional transformations are a result of cognitive learning processes emphasizing individual agency in the process. This approach allows an understanding of the specific nuances in this process that are less noticeable but can gradually lead to mobilizing diverse groups of stakeholders into a collaborative policy-making mode.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on the policy learning literature (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Borrás, 2011; Radaelli, 2009; Sabatier, 1988). Policy learning theories focus on human agency, how individuals process information, learn and solve problems, and eventually trigger institutional change. Dunlop and Radaelli (2013) define policy learning as a process of updating beliefs concerning policy based on lived or witnessed experiences, analysis, or social interaction. Several authors have emphasized the importance of learning capacity, linking it to one potential mechanism for policy change (Lundvall, Johnson, Andersen, & Dalum, 2002; Radaelli, 2009; Zito & Schout, 2009). Toens and Landwehr (2009) state that engaging in policy learning can become a survival strategy for policy makers to stay in power. It is a cognitive process that features changes in policy preferences. Such cognitive processes are often difficult to assess. Researchers have noted that it is easier to observe the products of learning, such as exemplary policy lessons, the usage of new policy instruments, and dramatic changes in the direction of public policy than the individual learning processes (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013). There is a need for more detailed accounts of the specific mechanisms and operations that connect learning with institutional change.

There are several conceptualizations on how policy learning as a gradual process can lead to institutional transformations. The most widely referenced is Bennett and Howlett's (1992) approach explaining policy learning in terms of who learns what and to what end. The authors differentiate between government learning, lesson-drawing, and social learning, demonstrating how each learning type can lead to organizational change, program change, or paradigm shifts in policies. The authors conclude that learning can be observed when policy change is present. This approach tends to undermine the cognitive aspects of policy making that do not necessarily translate into direct policy change. Radaelli (2008) states that the relationship between learning and policy change can break down at several points and the evidence of clear policy change is often limited. Radaelli (1995) emphasizes the importance of conflicts of interest, changing power relations, and legitimacy conditions in complex policy processes, making the outcomes unpredictable. Borrás (2011) notes that while there is a certain purposefulness in the process of learning, as it aims at improving the functioning of policies, it is hardly a rationalistic process. She builds on Bennett and Howlett's policy learning framework, looking at the process of learning through organizational capacity-building in innovation policy. Borrás (2011) argues that learning is evident through improved performance as an organization. *Government learning* is manifested in the change of organizational and administrative practices by which the civil servants manage their organizational performance. *Network learning* is based on collaboration and information sharing in the policy process. It is apparent when the major stakeholders are investigating and avoiding system failures (including market failures and policy instrument failures), defining suitable policy action. *Social learning* features paradigm shifts in collective understanding of policy issues. This learning type is translated into reflexive skills among a widely dispersed set of organizational actors (included media and other actors traditionally regarded as nonstakeholders in innovation policy). Participants contribute to a more general societal debate concerning the overall policy directions. This approach is useful in furthering our understanding of policy learning. Instead of linking those to policy change, it focuses on specific organizational behaviors that build capacity and can eventually lead to institutional transformations. Radaelli (2008) identifies three distinct learning mechanisms. "Learning by socialization" allows creating awareness among policy makers concerning their interdependence and can inspire increased commitment toward EU-level goals. "Learning by monitoring" helps to keep track of progress and to compare what has been achieved, and "learning by arguing and persuasion" as the preconditions for changes of policy preferences. This classification emphasizes the importance of collaborative aspects of social interaction as a precondition for learning.

Policy learning as a collaborative social process brings specific values and beliefs into focus. Bomberg (2007) states that policy learning is interest-infused. The learning process empowers participants by providing them with an opportunity to export their policy preferences and styles to others, enhance national or European interests, or avoiding real engagement by choice (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010). For that reason, several scholars have been critical in their analysis of the practices of the European Commission (e.g., Cram, 2011; Majone, 2005; Pollack, 2003). For example, Cram (1997) notes that the European Commission is a "purposeful

opportunist,” using low-key projects and programs to gain support and pave the way for its preferred course of action. Majone (2005) notes that the entrepreneurial European Commission is eager to expand its mandate within the EU using “stealth.” Overall, policy learning scholars agree that it is the learning capacity that has helped the Commission to enhance its role in research policy (Feindt, 2010).

While Borrás (2011) discusses the three levels of learning from the perspective of the member-states, the study does not focus on the specific mechanisms practiced at the EU level. This study focuses explicitly on the role of the European Commission in transnational policy coordination aiming to provide further evidence regarding the nuances of policy learning. The case of RTD highlights how an organization can achieve increased legitimacy by switching operational logic toward more horizontal, network-based practices and providing access to decision making to wider stakeholder groups. This case also demonstrates how social interactions with the member-states’ officials affect stakeholder perceptions on policy issues, leading to shifts in regional governance. Taking the policy learning approach allows an understanding of the specific mechanisms and gradual cumulative changes in the Commission’s behavior that eventually have increased its influence in governing regional research policy. This approach helps to clarify why member-states adjust to European concepts of research and innovation policies although they do not necessarily support the competitiveness aspect in integrated research policy.

Drawing from the concepts proposed by the scholars supporting a process-based approach to policy change (Lewis & Steinmo, 2012; Sabatier, 1988; Streeck & Thelen, 2005) and particularly the framework of policy learning (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Borrás, 2011; Radaelli, 2009), an adapted version of Borrás’s (2011) framework was used. By linking together the specific learning practices (government/administrative, network, and social learning) and the key developments in European research policy, a conceptual framework was created. The developments that illuminate best the core concepts of policy learning such as changing power relations, updating policy beliefs, learning by collaborative information sharing, and creating collective understanding of policy issues, were chosen. The framework emphasizing (i) *administrative learning through communication shifts*, (ii) *network learning through the Open Method of Coordination expert group debates*, and (iii) *social learning through issue framing* was created to analyze the capacity of policy learning in the European Commission.

Methodology and Methods

To better analyze the nuances of policy learning, a qualitative data collection technique was applied. The first step involved gathering the relevant documents from the early stages of the EU’s research policy. These documents included RTD policy reports, European Commission communications, Council of the European Union conclusions, country-specific reports, policy statements, memoranda, and minutes of the EU expert groups meetings. A content analysis of these documents (Weber, 1996) was carried out, identifying the approach to communication style and major policy ideas that were disseminated across the member-states. Document analysis

informed the basic understanding of the nuances in the historical process such as the nature of ideas communicated, the shift in the key policy processes, the key stakeholders involved, the mandate of the working groups, the process and methodology used for the policy learning initiatives, and the nature of the policy recommendations. Building on the document analysis, the key informants were identified and an interview protocol was designed.

The second step involved conducting semi-structured in-person interviews with the former and present RTD policy officers at the European Commission. The aim of the interviews was to confirm the initial findings from the document analysis and then gain more detailed perspectives on the process. A total of ten interviews were conducted in spring 2012 and fall 2013. Policy officers represented the following units: ERA Policy and Reform, Innovation Union Policy, Horizontal Aspects, and Best Practices for the Implementation of Innovation. Twenty-three interviews were conducted with the member-states' government officials who participated in the European level policy learning groups.

The interviews, averaging one hour in length, were recorded and transcribed. Collected data was organized, coded, and analyzed (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss, 1987). Categorical themes were determined (open coding), establishing patterns of themes (axial coding, selective coding) and developing generalizations from the information provided through the interviews (Creswell, 1998).

Findings

Administrative Learning Through Communication Shifts

The Commission is a central actor in the EU's policy making and the way its administration operates has implications on the relationships with the member-states. Kassim (2008) notes that there have been very few changes in terms of the Commission's main procedures over 40 years; however the Commission has always been interested and supportive of comprehensive administrative reforms. As all major operational shifts require support from the other European institutions, the changes have taken place in a less noticeable form. This analysis of the developments in research policy reveals three distinct phases in communication style of the Commission, pointing to the underlying learning processes involved: (i) isolated approach; (ii) centralized approach; and (iii) horizontal, network-based approach (See Table 1). Each period is examined in more detail below.

Isolated Approach (Early 1950s–Early 1980s)

Since the very beginning of the development of the European Union, research policy has been guided by pressures for deeper integration (Banchoff, 2002). The early cooperation projects took place in isolation without true commitment from the member-states. Banchoff (2002) notes that while there was some European level collaboration happening (the establishment of EURATOM [1957] or the creation of Scientific and Technical Research Committee [CREST] [1974] to oversee the coordination of national policies), no real coordination was apparent. There was

Table 1. Timeline of the EU's Research Commissioners

	Research Commissioner	Years in Office	Main Directions
Isolated Approach	Fritz Hellwig (Germany)	1967–1970	Cooperation in coal, steel, and nuclear energy
	Altiero Spinelli (Italy)	1970–1973	Research as part of DG Industrial Affairs (DGIII). Focus on applied research connected to industrial policy. Advocated for centralized research funding through ESF.
	Ralf Dahrendorf (Germany-UK)	1973–1977	New Directorate-General of “Research, Science and Education” (DG XII) (1973). Focus on fundamental research connected to education policy. Council resolution on common research and technology policy (1974). Creation of Scientific and Technical Research Committee (CREST) (1974). Advocated for the single area for European Science.
Centralized Approach	Guido Brunner (Germany)	1977–1981	Research policy part of the Energy, Research, Science and Education Directorate (DGXVII).
	Etienne Davignon (Belgium)	1981–1985	Initiated joint research projects such as ESPRIT for information technologies and RACE for communications technologies. Those led to the creation of the 1st FP (1984–1987) with the focus on agriculture and fisheries, new industrial technologies, raw materials, nuclear energy, protecting health.
	Karl-Heinz Narjes (Germany)	1985–1989	Single European Act (1986) legalized research policy as part of the economic competitiveness. 2nd FP (1987–1991) focus moved from energy research toward information and communication technologies.
	Filippo Maria Pandolfi (Italy)	1989–1993	3rd FP (1991–1994) focus on life sciences (agriculture, marine science, biomedical research), information technology, industrial and material technologies, nuclear energy, human capital (training research staff, creating scientific networks).
	Antonio Ruberti	1993–1994	4th FP (1994–1998) focus on life sciences (biotechnology and biomedicine), information technology, industrial and material technologies, non-nuclear energy, transport, socioeconomic research. Research incorporated to DG XII (Science, Research, and Development)
Horizontal Approach	Edith Cresson (France)	1995–1999	5th FP (1998–2002) four focus areas: climatic change, future energy solutions, telecommunications standards, and modern biotechnology. Research incorporated into DG Research. Political scandals that undermine the office.
	Philippe Busquin (Belgium)	1999–2004	6th FP (2002–2006) major structural reorganization to improve coordination of programs between DG XII (Science, Research, and Development) and DG XIII (Information Society: Telecommunications, Markets, Technologies—Innovation and Exploitation of Research). Launched the ERA concept (2000). Implementation of the Open Method of Coordination initiative (2003).
	Louis Michel (Belgium)	2004	Political agreement to complete Busquin's term.
	Janez Potočnik (Slovenia)	2004–2010	7th FP (2007–2013) full emphasis on policy learning and Open Method of Coordination.
	Maire Geoghegan-Quinn (Ireland)	2010–2014	DG Research changes name to DG Research and Innovation (2011) to indicate the increased emphasis on innovation. Negotiating the budget for Horizon 2020 (2014–2020). Innovation Union.

strong opposition from the member-states to expand European powers over major research projects. Guzzetti (1995) states that many science and technology related projects proposed by the Commission were declined by the member-states. The administration at the Commission approached the member-states with caution, aiming to find areas where collaboration was seen as being less threatening. A comment by a former Commission officer is illustrative:

The aim of Dahrendorf and Brunner was to establish a coherent science policy. And this took enormous effort and time. ... The European Commission tried to advance areas which were not possibly rejected by any of the big member-states. For instance paper [production]. Anybody would accept something on environmental research. And if the EC takes the burden out of national authorities, its was accepted. That was the mentality.

Most research co-operation in Europe unfolded on an intergovernmental basis (Banchoff, 2002). The political decision for the research sector to become a Community policy was made in 1974 (European Council, 1974), but the unstable organizational structure was another reason for fragmented performance. For example, in 1970 research policy was part of an industrial policy (DGIII) and focused on applied research. In 1973 the Directorate-General for Research, Development, and Education (DG XII) was established. It became connected to education policies and was oriented toward fundamental research (Guzzetti, 1995). The isolated and cautious approach was not working. Member-states needed more tangible incentives to be involved. With the new leadership a change in the communication with member-states was proposed.

Centralized Approach (1984–1990)

Commissioner Davignon proposed a centralized funding system for research. He was able to initiate several joint technology projects designed to enhance European industry in international competition (ESPRIT, RACE). These projects were incorporated into a multi-year Framework Program (FP) in 1984 (Banchoff, 2002). As an informant reflects: “The FP changed the situation enormously. It was the expression of the beginning of the end of the resistance.” Research funding became a central mechanism for enhancing the European level research agenda. The primary focus was in four priority areas—energy, raw materials, environment, agriculture and industrial research (European Commission, 1980). Representatives from the member-states were involved in designing the Framework Program. However, the powerful role of formulation and implementation of research programs was left within the European Commission, DG Research and Innovation (Banchoff, 2002; Gornitzka, 2009). The creation of such a single program meant the start of gradual legitimacy-building for the European Commission. As a result, the operational role of the Commission changed from being rhetorical to directly influencing research directions. Banchoff (2002) argues that while the FP was supported by the program beneficiaries from the member-states, it actually did a disservice to the Commission. The administration of the program absorbed all the administrative and political energies of the Commission, making RTD a funding agency and leaving it incapable of building political momentum for broader reform in European research policy.

The direction toward increased centralization was taken further. The Single European Act (1987) legalized research and technological development and transferred the competencies in research policy to the European Commission (Prange, 2003). The Maastricht Treaty on European Union of 1992 translated this approach of European research policy into specific rules and procedures (Banchoff, 2002). This suggested increased regulatory power for the Commission (Pollack, 2000).

Pollack (2000) notes that the 1990s witnessed a political and economic backlash against the spread of EU competencies caused by the creeping centralization. As one Commission expert comments: “It was around 1990s when the member-states started to be less supportive of the Commission. Even the French, who were always enormously supportive, started to criticize the Commission.” In this diffuse policy environment, it was time, once again, to change organizational and administrative practices in the Commission to help gain support from the member-states.

Horizontal, Network-Based Approach (2000s Onward)

In 2000, Philippe Busquin launched the most ambitious effort to coordinate research policy in Europe—the European Research Area. To address the fragmentation, isolation, and compartmentalization of national research efforts and break away from the centralized approach of the Framework Programs, a change that did not involve any legal or regulatory means was needed. In 2003, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) as a policy method was introduced in research policy. As a “soft method” for policy coordination, the OMC initiative emphasizes mutual learning across the stakeholders. It is characterized as a bottom-up, voluntary, and non-binding method of policy making that utilizes debates, benchmarking, and the exchange of best practices (Borrás & Radaelli, 2010; Warleigh-Lack & Drachenberg, 2011). The process is guided and facilitated by the members of the RTD and the European Research Area Committee (ERAC). The OMC initiative allocated a central coordinating role to the RTD in facilitating the process and gave an opportunity to build organizational capacity through acquiring new knowledge from the direct channels on the member-states. From the member-states it involves mainly government officials but also university administrators and academics, providing them access to European level policy making. As a Commission expert comments:

What it really was all about, was basically changing gear, in the way we were working with the member-states. ... You need to put a lot more emphasis on the adaptation processes that the member-states can undertake by themselves.

The process has not been smooth. The institutional inertia that associates European research policy primarily with the Framework Program is still present (Banchoff, 2002). There have been several critical analyses of the OMC indicating a lack of results for policy change (Kröger, 2009; Radaelli, 2008). Yet there are important references made on its qualitative impact (McGuinness & O’Carroll, 2010; Zeitlin, 2011). There is evidence that the exchange of ideas and shared policy approaches through the OMC policy debates are gradually leading to ownership of decisions and contributed to more coordinated policy approaches at the European level (Tamtik, 2014). Several mutually designed policy documents provide additional evidence. For example, the endorsement of “The European Charter for Researchers” and “The Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers” were two policy documents promulgated in 2005. Another example is the establishment of a European-level discussion forum aiming to develop large-scale research infrastructure projects—ESFRI (European Strategic Forum for Research Infrastructures). The most important contribution of the OMC policy debates is that it provides a formal setting where diverse interests can be presented, discussed, and

learned from. In this process of collaboration, the participants have an opportunity to become aware of the various arguments and challenges that are commonly faced. In addition, gradually building trust and mutual understanding is necessary for taking a policy dialogue forward (Innes & Booher, 2003).

As demonstrated by this overview the vagueness of the initial European research policy, unclear organizational structure, and the lack of motivation by the member-states served as core challenges which eventually led to administrative learning in the RTD organizational capacity. Since then a series of steps in administrative learning have taken place. The European Commission has shifted its operational logic twice as a result of the learning process. Starting with a decentralized, isolated approach in supporting single research projects and themes, the EC shifted to a centralized approach using regulatory and financial means for policy coordination. Stumbling in grant management tasks and losing legitimacy among the member-states, another communication shift was needed. A more collaborative approach was then adopted to build mutual ownership for policy decisions. As a result of these changes, the Commission has increased its organizational legitimacy, positioning itself as the central organization that facilitates social interactions among member-states and monitors their progress in research.

Network Learning Through the OMC Expert Group Debates

Several scholars refer to the “legitimacy crisis” of the European Union in the late 1990s (Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004). The Commission argued that the legitimacy of the Union “depends on involvement and participation” (Cram, 2011). These concerns led to introducing the Open Method of Coordination process, which has served as a key mechanism for broadening participation and getting member-states involved. This method brings the Commission officers, government policy experts, and other stakeholders together for information-sharing purposes. As it allows for discussions to emerge on best policy practices in research, it also focuses on analyzing policy failures. This is stated to lead to “deep learning” where individuals learn by critically reflecting on their own policy practices (Lange & Alexiadou, 2010). Through the OMC, the RTD has had an opportunity to build its organizational capacity in leading the process of European research policy. The process has broadened the Commission officers’ understanding of the specific policy issues of the member-states, their political interests, views, and potential oppositions regarding any sensitive topics. This information has helped the RTD administrators to better prepare for strategic leading in the policy development process. As an EC policy maker reflects:

For the Commission it was very interesting as we learned a lot about how member-states can act together in this area. ... We knew then already how member-states felt to certain extent about areas where they can work together and where they want to work together or barriers for coordination in S&T processes. And this was overall very helpful and we sometimes go back to the reports when we try to initiate new activities.

The RTD officers have actively participated in the OMC learning process. Their knowledge contributions have involved administrative support but they have also provided procedural knowledge, based on their experience on how European level policy processes work. The Commission officers offered advice on how to best

formulate group objectives, contributed statistical data, made sure that the objectives were in line with the Commission policy directions, and helped with the drafting of group documents. The Commission informants frequently viewed their role as the facilitators of the process, leaving the leadership role to the member-states. The following quote is illustrative:

The role of the Commission would be to organize this sharing of information, trying to make sense out of the diversity of situations, possibly identify best practices ... that one should take inspiration from. ... What the Commission can then do is to say, ok, now that you have accepted to discuss this, we have commonly identified different options and possibly the best option that we at Commission can spread and codify this best practice into a document.

By facilitating such information exchange, the Commission remained in the position of handling the learning results afterward. As a result of the OMC, the Commission was given a mandate to reach out to other units and create new networks within the Commission to enhance those policy dialogues. As an EC policy maker reflected:

You suddenly had an array of policy issues where DG Research, in order to try to move ahead with the EU research policies, found itself now in building up linkages and dialogues with a lot of the other policy departments in the Commission. Something that it didn't have up until that point. There was no real sort of discourse with the others.

In addition to involving other Commission units in its learning practices, the Commission administrators were able to establish a network of country-specific contacts. Such personal contacts were useful for providing up-to-date information on the current situation in the member-states. The experts delivered the Commission administrators the most recent country-specific data related to research policy, useful for strengthening the Commission's position in the regional governance. As a result, RTD was able to position itself as the information holder that collects and distributes the commonly accepted best practices across the region. For example, after the OMC process on internationalization, the Commission published at least four official reports based on the policy learning activities (ranging from 32 to 128 pages), which were disseminated to the representatives of all member-states through ERAC and the European Commission. This knowledge dissemination function helped to further establish RTD's position as a catalyst for increased policy coordination across the stakeholder groups.

While the focus of the study is on the learning that led to organizational changes in RTD, it is important to recognize that policy learning works both ways. The OMC learning initiatives also provided ways for the member-states' participants to learn about the Commission and the policies of other member-states. Such an opportunity to explore policy alternatives was welcomed by the member-states' experts as demonstrated by the following quote:

... even though we'll have the research policies as national responsibility, we do not operate in a vacuum, and it's always interesting to learn how other countries develop instruments and what kind of instruments they've used in their research policy ... in a way to get the best understanding of policy in other countries and to see if there would be anything to learn. (member-state expert, Norway)

Operating as experts in their respective policy areas, the participants were curious to study what new initiatives were emerging across Europe and what policy

approaches seem to be useful. Also, these debates helped the experts to become more aware of the diverse cultures within the RTD, their particular struggles and challenges within the organization, and helped them build trust among the stakeholders. This realization has led to updating member-states' administrators cognitive beliefs, resulting in increased understanding and acceptance of the Commission's work.

Paradigm Shift Through Issue Framing

Issue framing contributes to social learning where collective understanding of policy issues changes. Chong and Drukman (2007) suggest that framing is a socially constructed reality, which affects the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences. Verduijn, Meijerink, and Leroy (2012) define "framing strategies" as strategies aimed at managing perceptions, creating awareness, and securing support for a particular frame. Cram (2011) notes that institutions that lack a formal legal base for binding legislations use "soft" methods such as mobilizing actors for new emerging narratives. The author views the creation of the "good governance" narrative by the incoming Commission President Prodi in 2000, featuring openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence, as an example of issue framing to gain support and generate a sense of belonging. The centralized approach from the 1990s had created resistance and a lack of support toward the EU institutions, so the Commission had learned to change its tactics.

By analyzing developments in the European research policy, several framing strategies have become apparent that facilitate creating the collective support for the major initiatives led by the Commission. As a result, regional support across the member-states has been gradually attained through political commitment to work toward the Europe 2020 Strategy and Innovation Union goals. The frames used to achieve such a support have been made relevant to the specific stakeholder group, have been inclusive of representatives from most of the member-states, and are linked to the socioeconomic benefits for the region.

Document analysis reveals three main frames utilized by the Commission to target specific stakeholder groups. To influence policy makers, the European Commission has actively promoted and utilized the "global competitiveness" frame. The Lisbon Strategy of 2000 clearly states the ambitious goal to become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy" with the help of a coordinated research policy. European Research Area's latest progress report indicates that Europe needs to increase its "global competitiveness and capability to successfully tackle grand societal challenges" (Council of the European Union, 2014). By positioning Europe as a leader in research innovation despite lacking a strategic policy focus compared with the United States and Japan (European Commission, 2013), RTD highlights the pressing need for coherent policy approaches in the global competitiveness context. This message accompanies the firm procedures of monitoring, evaluating, and recommending policy approaches across the member-states by the RTD.

Framing policy coordination as a "common concern" that can bring significant benefits to the individual researchers has been used to approach the European scientists. Achieving a European Research Area (ERA) has been used as a mechanism to facilitate regional reforms among the member-states. An ERA document

directed to member-states' researchers lists all the potential benefits that researchers can expect as a result of increased transnational cooperation. For example, increased policy coordination is seen to be useful as it helps to improve fragmentation of the European market, so that more research-based employment opportunities can emerge. It is also seen to help to "attract talent, provide researchers with better skills for industry-collaboration, and ultimately increase quality of research, lowering transaction costs" (European Research Area, 2012). To achieve these benefits, increased political commitment is required. Such a framing pushes individual stakeholders to influence their national governments toward policy change. A former employee of the Commission recalls using such tactics in the early phases of European policy making:

You had to travel a lot and find allies, among the Academy of Sciences to put pressure on the local authorities who came to Brussels to a meeting. I found great support in the Royal Society in England or in some good university—Cambridge or Oxford. They could give you advice and they could put pressure on all national authorities in London. There was an opportunity to influence members very indirectly and I used that quite a lot.

The overexploitation of the competitiveness frame has created a certain fatigue and exhaustion over the policy developments among the citizens of the European Union. The support of individuals toward the European policy directions has considerably decreased. As a EC policy maker comments:

Today European Union is blamed on everything that goes wrong in Europe. ... If you would try to make referendum in France, if a question contains even the words "European Union" in it, the answer would be no.

As a response, the new wave of framing is striving toward responding to the societal needs of European citizens. As declared by the Commission's recent policy documents (Europe 2020, 2015; European Commission, 2012), the RTD is now increasingly engaged in a "responsible research and innovation" agenda, determined to bridge the gap between the scientific community and the society at large. It aims to foster public engagement in civil society to respond to the needs of the citizens of Europe. The emphasis is on creating more and sustainable jobs, and approaching societal problems through innovative health and environmental research among others. The goal is to include citizens and make European policy decisions directly relevant to every individual living in the region.

Overall, framing strategies to influence different stakeholder groups by applying distinctive framing strategies are evident in the European Commission's policy documents. The absence of a strong opposing frame has helped to gain wider acceptance of the Commission's message. By catering to each group according to their specific needs, the Commission has been able to achieve wider acknowledgment and support of its policy initiatives. The question becomes how the Commission is able to maintain the balance of the support toward its activities, so that stakeholders keep engaged and contribute to the processes in the future.

European Commission as the Catalyst for Regional Governance

Institutional transformations, as described above, have brought important policy changes in European governance that have gradually impacted the European

research landscape. The European Commission has taken the role of a broader policy developer and the initiator of regional policy change. Most importantly, the resistance among the member-states has started to decline. While there are still policy approaches and major research cooperation initiatives taking place at the national level, the perceptions concerning the need for stronger regional collaboration are growing. For example, in 1984 the community support for coordinated European scientific research ranged from 6% (Ireland) to 24% (France). In 2010, the support of European citizens had increased to 72% (Eurobarometer, 2012). The member-states' policy officers indicate increasing concern about the fragmentation of national and European policy approaches and prefer collaboration over fragmentation. Several member-states' policy experts expressed the idea that the increased European-level policy coordination is important. An expert from Italy notes:

[W]e felt that it was time for a more systematic approach [at] the EU level to avoid the duplicity and segmentation. Because there were some activities at the member-states level and some things done by the European Commission, but nobody in fact knew what the other side was doing.

The perceptions of the RTD representatives provide additional evidence of the gradual support toward collaboration: "Well, I think the first and most important thing that I learned was that there is the willingness of member-states to work together." An awareness of the EC decision-making process has been built gradually, as member-states are increasingly invited to contribute to the process. By working together, the policy views have been updated through sharing ideas, learning, and accepting policy views of the other actors. The member-states' experts have become knowledgeable and accepting of the decision-making processes in the European Commission.

The findings clearly indicate a gradual paradigm shift in policy behavior in the European Commission, RTD. From the 1980s until the 2000s the European research policy had a limited scope and was mostly operating in the funding cycles of the Framework Programs. As a result of network-based policies, policy learning initiatives and issue framing strategies, there is a significant transformation toward broader policy development in the EU's research and innovation policy. Through the mutual learning processes, member-states were able to point to several issues that needed political decisions such as mobility of researchers, an internationalization strategy for research cooperation with countries outside of the EU, and the development of large-scale research infrastructure projects, among others (Tamtik, 2012). Through the Open Method of Coordination initiatives the Commission was given a clear mandate to take the policy discussions forward.

Monitoring and evaluating national progress in research plays an important part in the policy coordination process (Radaelli, 2008). In 2010, the concept of the European Semester was introduced to better align national policy goals and secure fiscal means for economic growth. While the European Semester has a broader focus on the larger economic development, RTD is focusing specifically on monitoring progress in the European Research Area and the Innovation Union. RTD has conducted extensive analysis of research and innovation performance at the national level and has produced analytical reports on how to increase innovation capacity in Europe (European Commission, RTD, 2013). These examples illustrate the contributions the Commission has made toward initiating new policy debates and

strengthening existing policy conversations at the European level. Yet the institutional transformations have been long term, balancing the resistance from the member-states and pursuing more coherent policy approaches in research.

Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of the article was to explain the emerging role of the European Commission, DG Research and Innovation, in shaping the European research policy and examine its specific mechanisms. The analysis shows that policy learning, understood as a process of updating one's policy beliefs through social interactions, serves as a powerful factor in institutional transformations, helping to gradually position DG Research and Innovation as a leading policy catalyst in Europe. Some of the broader causes that triggered this learning at RTD include an unclear position of research policy in the Union's early development agenda, the lack of legitimacy of the Commission in the 1990s, and the resistance and a lack of involvement of the member-states in policy making (Banchoff, 2002; Borrás & Jacobsson, 2004; Cram, 2011). The specific types of policy learning served as core mechanisms for change. The findings explain how administrative learning through communication shifts in RTD have triggered and led to a more inclusive operational style in the Commission. Network learning by the Open Method of Coordination has helped to form horizontal and vertical stakeholder networks that serve as important information channels for social interactions. Social learning by framing strategies mobilized different stakeholder groups to create foundations for paradigm shifts. As a consequence of those mechanisms, the RTD has become an important leader and a policy catalyst in the regional governance that is now increasingly shaping European-level policy directions. This finding corresponds with the earlier research indicating the potential of the European Commission to become a central actor in strategic research fields (Kaiser & Prange-Gstöhl, 2010). It also supports the views that indicate the significance of learning capacity on organizational performance (Borrás, 2011; Trubek & Trubek, 2005).

Policy learning is a long-term process, outcomes of which are not always rational or predictable. Yet this process helps to increase organizational adaptability in diverse policy contexts. The three types of learning—government learning, network learning, and social learning—provide a framework for such adaptability. As noted by Borrás (2011) these processes are interdependent. By changing the administrative relationship with the member-states the Commission was able to bring stakeholders closer together and led the process of updating policy preferences. It provided the Commission with the mandate to work toward providing solutions to commonly identified problems, monitoring progress in the member-states, and increasing its organizational legitimacy. This finding supports the point made by Borrás (2007) where she views the Commission as a resilient central network broker that continues to play a leading role in managing interaction between multiple actors at different levels of governance.

There are several administration-related implications derived from this research. The findings suggest that policy learning practices can improve performance and strengthen organizational position in regional governance. With the

increasing emphasis on evidence-based policy making in changing policy environments, policy learning exercises provide crucial ways of systematically collecting evidence about policies that work. Through coordinated policy learning initiatives, knowledge on best practices can be gained, accompanied with the inputs by experts on why a certain policy approach has been effective. Such first-hand information is not available otherwise. Therefore, it is important to create and facilitate opportunities for policy learning.

This article shows how these specific mechanisms potentially help in creating stakeholder ownership of the decisions. The impacts of policy discussions in the open coordination approach are significant in terms of circulating ideas, new knowledge, and concepts that have the potential to enter the policy process indirectly. The most important contribution of these policy learning initiatives is that it provides a formal setting where diverse interests can be presented, discussed, and learned from. This experience-based learning contributes to updating policy beliefs and enhances the common understanding of how to take a policy dialogue forward. As noted by Coletti and Radaelli (2013) policy makers should think of options that are less contingent on rational-synoptic models but support generating dialogue with the stakeholders to widen peripheral vision of regulations. Therefore, the potential opportunities created by policy learning processes cannot be overlooked.

Several factors need to be considered for creating productive learning practices. There has to be political commitment for the process. Only by providing the highest political level support can the process yield meaningful outcomes. Therefore, the framing of learning needs to be relevant to the larger public. Considering ways to secure participation activity in learning initiatives is also important. This could be done by mutually agreeing on relevant topics, clearly stating the benefits of the process and making arrangements to reduce the regular work-responsibilities of the participants, thus making time for policy learning. The benefits of the process should explicitly include the establishment of group exercises that require active participation, such as distributing work assignments, developing potential policy scenarios, mapping and comparing policy approaches, and grouping experts based on similarities of research systems. Diversity in the pool of participants must be carefully sought so as to assure different viewpoints and knowledge in the process. Learning opportunities should be advertised among a wide range of experts to involve knowledge contributions from stakeholders external to the organization. With those steps organizational performance can be enhanced, creating a strong foundation for facing uncertainty in the rapidly changing policy contexts.

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